
The 'First' Educator? Rethinking the 'Teacher' Through Luce Irigaray's Philosophy of Sexual Difference

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Abstract

This article examines historical imagery of the teacher in relation to a story drawn from ancient Greece: that relating to the teacher of the mythic hero Achilles in The Iliad. The article explores the possibility that this early image of a teacher – the aging warrior Phoenix – could be a source for later representations of the teaching function. In an effort to place this historical image into a larger context of cultural symbolism relating to pedagogy, the article asks, why is this 'first' educator a man? By what narrative procedure was a man contrived to assume roles such as nurturing and childrearing that had always been (and continue to be) represented as feminine occupations? Using the work of Luce Irigaray, the article raises issues about the sex of the teacher in order to disrupt the seemingly obvious sex-neutrality of modern images of education, which define teaching and learning as humanistic, as social and cultural practices for which gender is irrelevant, and through which abstract disciplines such as literacy and numeracy are represented as transcending the physicality of the sexed body. It attempts to expose the constant deference modern educators unconsciously pay to patriarchal models of the pedagogical relationship, and to reveal the repression of sexual difference at the core of the mythology from which Western images of education have been generated.

Introduction

This article discusses the place occupied in educational history by a character drawn from the literature of ancient Greece: Phoenix (Μῆνικος) who in Book IX of *The Iliad* appears as the teacher of the hero Achilles. According to Werner Jaeger, Phoenix is substituted in this part of Homer's narrative for Chiron (Οἰάωνες), Phoenix being a mortal, Chiron a centaur (immortal, half-man, half-horse) (1939, p 26). Both Chiron and Phoenix are mythic individuals; both were originally chosen by Achilles' father

Peleus, having interceded on Peleus' behalf on different occasions with the gods. Yet the story of Phoenix provides educational history with an important narrative description, appearing as it does at the very beginning of canonical literature about teaching in the Western tradition. Notwithstanding Chiron's position, Phoenix could be described as the 'first' teacher, and my aim is to examine what effect, if any, the narrative surrounding Phoenix may have had in the construction of images and symbols of teaching. What boundaries did the story of Phoenix establish for the mode(s) of conceptualising the functions of a teacher?

As I am not a scholar of classical antiquity, and cannot claim special knowledge of Homeric literature, or even of the language in which the narrative I am studying was written, I will tread carefully in my examination. My larger interest is generally in supplying a critical study of the symbols and images through which ideas of teaching have been generated in educational history. Specifically however, in this study I consider how a 'teacher' figure emerges, as what, and why. If Phoenix (or Chiron) can claim an originary status, what is the genesis and structure through which 'teacher' comes into being?

To guide me in this study, I refer to the work of Luce Irigaray on theories of sexual difference. Reasons for my selection include (1) Irigaray's exposition of theories of language, of cultural narrative and of history, of representation and the symbolic, all of which are central to the themes explored here; (2) my own cognisance of the difficulties surrounding the application of a gender-neutral term such as 'teacher' to individuals of different sexes, particularly for the construction of theoretical frameworks in education. There is a radical discontinuity here, of course, in time-periods, between applications of the notion of teaching from antiquity to the present. But my adoption of Irigaray's methods is designed to address this discontinuity, since, as Margaret Whitford argues, Irigaray is a 'theorist of change' (Whitford 1989, p 108). Irigaray points out that the form of social and historical change does not follow a sequence of *physical* variation-to-*ideal* variation. For instance, the social status of women (and for me, this applies especially to the social identity of teachers, since so many *are* women) cannot be altered as a result of changes in material identity (e.g., greater professional and remunerative status) because 'one cannot so easily change symbolic meanings because they have an imaginary foundation which persists despite material changes' (Whitford 1989, p 122).

Examining the story of Phoenix is part of research into the imaginary foundations underpinning 'teacher'. So, in contributing to debate about the formation of an identity for 'the' teacher, I raise questions such as: does the teacher have a sex? Is the 'being' or experience of the teacher the same regardless of sex? If not, what are the possible ramifications of a multiplicity of experiences for teachers? This is especially

relevant to what Dunne (1993, p35), calls 'teacher-proof' teaching systems, our modern school systems which demand universal pedagogical strategies, and technical procedures that do not recognise sex as a variable, for example, in learning abstract disciplines such as literacy and numeracy.

Having raised the 'symbolic' content of *The Iliad*, and the 'imaginary' foundations of teaching, I will briefly define those terms so as to introduce my analytic approach. Both words derive from psychoanalytic theory, Irigaray herself having been a practicing analyst as well as writing controversial criticism¹ of Freudian orthodoxy and of the work of Jacques Lacan. The latter applied semiotics to Freudian theory, drawing connections between a given symbol as an expression of individual intentionality and desire, and the social and linguistic codes through which the will, consciousness and the value systems of individuals are established. For Lacan, 'symbolic' referred ostensibly to the contents of the psychical unconscious, which he famously claimed was 'structured' like 'a language' (Lacan 1977, p 147); directed as it was to the technical aspects of interpreting a patient's spoken description of dream-experience, this innovation can be applied, as with Irigaray², to any narrative or text with the similar aim of elucidating repressed meaning.

'Imaginary' was elaborated chiefly through Lacan's theory of the 'mirror-stage' in which infants initially discover the 'form' or image pertaining to 'self' by seeing their negative-image in the mirror (Lacan 1977, p 1-7). Irigaray places that theory into the wider discursive context(s) in which dominant procedures of representation *as male self-representation* emerge: thus the 'imaginary' is always for man, a 'relationship to the negative...hence the impetus it gives to fictive, mythic, or ideal productions that are only afterward defined as laws assuring the permanence and circularity of this system' (Irigaray 1985a, p 52). Hence, also, my own attention to the 'first' teacher, and to the possibility that Phoenix serves certain purposes that are hitherto buried in the mythology of Greek antiquity.

Why is Phoenix (teacher) a man?

The scene: a gathering of warriors around the hero, Achilles. The hero has just declaimed his plans about advice from the gods regarding the prospect of defeat in battle, and a hushed silence has fallen. 'But finally there spoke among them the old horseman Phoenix, bursting into tears...

With you the old horseman Peleus sent me on the day when he sent
you out from Phthia to Agamemnon, a mere child, knowing nothing as
yet of evil war, nor of assemblies in which men become pre-eminent.

For this reason he sent me to instruct you in all these things, to be both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds (Homer 1999, p 427).

Phoenix enters the educational imaginary as the teacher of Achilles, who was the son of Peleus and Thetis, Peleus being king of Phthia; Thetis, the daughter of Nereus (god of the Mediterranean) and Doris. Thetis is therefore a goddess, and is supposed to have been given as a wife to Peleus because of his devotion to the gods, but she apparently abandoned the union after the birth of the child, as Jaeger notes amusingly, 'because he [Peleus] was rather poor company' (Jaeger, 1939, p 374).

The departure of Thetis supposedly provides the juncture at which Peleus appoints Phoenix to tutor the juvenile Achilles. However the selection of Phoenix as guardian holds greater complexity than what seems to unfold, at first glance, from this sudden vacancy. For instance, why is the guardian a man? Why does Peleus not use a woman to substitute for his absent wife? Surely, according to prevailing beliefs, a female would be better qualified as nursemaid, particularly since, on Phoenix's own account, Achilles was very young at the time. Marrou points out that 'it was to Phoenix that Peleus owed, amongst other things, the fact that he had been successful in his suit for the hand of Thetis...and it was only natural' Marrou declares, 'that the king should entrust his son to his care' (1956, p 26).

However, this explanation of the sequence of events surrounding the appointment of Phoenix as guardian seems tenuous: would a man of Phoenix's own background really occupy this position? Phoenix was not a slave, after all, and in the social hierarchy of Greek antiquity, he therefore possessed considerable status that placed him well above even the women of noble lineage, let alone the slave-women who would have more commonly performed what were at that time seen as relatively mundane tasks, such as caring for, feeding, and instructing infants and children (Thalmann 1998, p 31). For his part, Phoenix is proud of this aspect of the history between himself and Achilles:

With no other would you go to the feast or take meat in the hall, till I had set you on my knees and given you your fill of the savoury morsel cut first for you, and had put the wine cup to your lips. Often did you wet the tunic on my chest, sputtering out the wine in your childish helplessness (Homer 1999, p 431).

Achilles is plainly too young even to feed himself at the point when Peleus appoints Phoenix to take over from Thetis. But the problem I have raised about the powerful imbalance that applied to the sexes in this era may, ironically, provide part of the larger explanation I am seeking for Phoenix's role. Perhaps it was explicitly *because*

he was a man that Phoenix was better qualified than any slave-woman to rear the young hero. We must acknowledge after all, that what we are discussing is, to some extent, a *fait accompli*, since the selection of Phoenix would be balanced against the other narrative elements of the hero's life journey. The story is not a typical account of daily life circa the eighth century BCE, and although it may owe itself, in some degree, to an ancient reality, what is far more relevant is, to what degree Phoenix was contrived deliberately to carry a particular kind of symbolism within Homer's narrative?

Erasing the mother from human reproduction

Re-examining this symbolic content largely entails trying to determine what were/are the underlying values pertaining to the text, and its composition, which may have influenced how it has been understood at various points in its history as literature. Phoenix is a man who assumes a stereotypically 'womanly' social function, at least in taking care of Achilles as an infant. Does this imply that men would ideally be better than women at being 'mothers'? To provide some context, particularly about the meaning of the mother-role in Greek antiquity, I note Lloyd's discussion of prevailing beliefs about sexual reproduction. This indicates that it would be rash to assume any continuity with our own modern Western understanding of the roles played by men and women in conception, gestation and birth. According to Lloyd, the Greeks

saw the father as providing the formative principle, the real causal force of generation, whilst the mother provided only the matter which received form or determination, and nourished what had been produced by the father (1984, p 3).

It was believed that mothers did not contribute to forming a child. All credit was owed to the father's seed.³ Could such beliefs have mitigated upon the selection of a man to replace a deserting wife, at least in 'mothering' a son?⁴ Is it possible for a man to 'be' a mother, or does this carry the symbolism too far?⁵ What does seem to accompany the switch from woman to man in this case is the perfunctoriness with which the parental duties are represented. It is as if anyone could do them. They are, in this sense, reduced to a *sex/less* technical procedure.

These questions seem to provoke, for me, the larger issue of what relation exists between the concept of education and the 'natural', less quantifiable, some might say more imperceptible process of learning (and hence, of 'teaching') that takes place in the home, in early childhood, before a teacher enters the scene and inserts the child into the role of 'student'. This latter process has the quality of being, perhaps, less

subject to the type of reduction and quantification requisite to the construction of universalising technique. It was the Greeks, after all, who gave us the concept of '*technē*', so it would seem useful at this point to digress to a brief explanation of it and its implications, and to examine how those ideas may have applied to the story of Phoenix.

To begin with, what was '*technē*', and did it apply to what women or men do/did as mothers and fathers? The short answer is that it is unlikely that many aspects of mothering would have been treated as a *technē* (craft or technique) because of the intricate relationship that applied, especially in the work of Plato and Aristotle, to concepts of practical knowledge, inhering as rational powers exercised by male citizens (Dunne 1993, p 244). But there is a longer answer that deserves some explication here, mainly through reference to an argument raised by Irigaray, in her discussion of Heidegger's ontology.⁶ This argument focuses on two understandings of 'being' that originated among the pre-Socratic⁷ thinkers, and which were ultimately reinterpreted, particularly by Aristotle, in ways that led to a 'forgetting' of one understanding of 'being' and the privileging of the other.

Does education have a beginning and an end?

Heidegger explains that the Romans used the word *natura* when translating the Greek ΝΑΦ4Η, giving us *physis* or *physics* (Heidegger 1998, p 183). Fielding explains there were two kinds of 'being' that Heidegger attributes to the pre-Socratics, with the first drawing explicitly on the latter term:

physei onta (beings from *physis*) are in movedness...[e.g.,] trees grow and wither, infants become adults...however, beings that are made (*poioumena*), bedsteads for example, are at rest from the movement of having been produced (Fielding 2003, p 4).

Irigaray's way of describing the two kinds of being are as *first matter*, and as *the forms*.⁸ The notion of 'forms' is especially relevant to *technē*, which was 'a reasoned state of capacity to make' involving 'the generation of 'things whose source (*archē*) is in the producer and not in the product' (Dunne 1993, p 249). To view a mother as a 'producer' of babies in the same context in which the Greeks understood *technē* would be to reduce mothering to a kind of making that it is not. The 'making' implied here is specifically a construction according to an ideal or model 'form' of an object, such as a bedstead.

In contrast, for Irigaray, 'the human cannot detach itself from her from whom it is born, like a thing with regard to whoever fabricated it' (2002, p 128). As mothers,

women do not make babies in the same sense that factories make cars. Babies are not autonomous. If they assume object-status specifically and exclusively in relation to their familial or social purpose, it is because 'mother' has been represented as 'producer' and baby as 'product'. In such cases, a separation between mother and baby has been applied to maternity that suppresses the reality of a physical continuity between, for instance, baby *in utero*, or to the neonate, and which derives from the idea of autonomy and agency. Suffice to say that such agency cannot really be said to fully apply so long as a mother or child continues to address that sense of continuity, consciously or unconsciously. In the same context it is worthwhile considering whether the original relation between woman and child is 'extinguished' by the process of insertion into the roles of teacher and pupil, and whether the sex of the teacher further mediates upon this process. Would placing a child such as Achilles in the care of a man suppress or alter the kind of development he had experienced with his mother, especially if he had had meagre contact with his father up to that point?

The practices of sexual reproduction, mothering, and parenting belong in the understanding of 'being' as *first matter* and not as *forms*. This is partly also because of the social culture that would rule over the representation and functioning of relations between mother and child were such a misrecognition to take place: as components of a *techne*, baby or child would need to develop according to an 'end (*telos*) of the making' and thus to 'be looked on either as the realized form itself or, beyond that, as the use it serves in people's lives' (Dunne 1993, p 249). None of this is, of course, merely incidental to our own educational culture, with its rampant fetishisation of achievements, goals, objectives and outcomes: a lingering sign of the continuing hegemony of metaphysical categories in an increasingly technocratic society.

Heidegger describes Aristotle's complicity in blurring the distinction between the two (*physei onta* and *poioumena*) (1998, p 229), so that, in the modern age 'nature is thought of as ontic material, as matter that can be excavated, ordered, and stored as energy for future use by humans' (Fielding 2003, p 4). The reader should understand 'ontic material' precisely as *metaphysical*, *placed* within an order, represented *for* a goal. These qualities betray the fact that when nature is thought this way, it is already subject to the instrumentality and boundaries of origin established for it by human makers with technical goals in mind. As Fielding indicates, Heidegger's major contribution here is in distinguishing between a trust in 'the phenomenal world of lived experience...our own experience of what is' and, on the other hand, 'the certainty of that which we represent to ourselves', which came to privilege ideal forms (2003, p 4).

The dispute that Irigaray has with Heidegger stems from the fact that while the insight into the hegemony of *techne* and *techne*-oriented ontology is profound, his response to the difficulties which the forgetting of *physei onta* presents to humanity falls short of recognising the specific kind of ‘movedness’ or motion that was always ‘inscribed in nature, in *physis*’ (Fielding 2003, p 7). Irigaray identifies the weakness in Heidegger’s emphasis on the ‘movedness’ of *physis* or nature *as* ‘production of itself, from out of itself, unto itself’ (Heidegger 1998, p 227) and as a ‘giving’ accompanied by a ‘withdrawing’. Irigaray’s concern for the cumulative symbolic effects of this are that when nature is represented as sexually undifferentiated, the dominant symbol of humanity (Man and mankind) takes credit for production of itself, that is, as man giving birth to himself. Fielding explains that, for Irigaray

the giving of the maternal feminine, as well as the giving of nature, are not composed merely of a source that gives and then withdraws; the giving of air (and often the giving of mothering) is continual; it is given before any upsurge of being (for example, gestation that precedes birth), and it continues to give without measure (Fielding 2003, p 12).

An implication of this is that it is important to be careful when using the term ‘natural’ in reference to what happens between mother and child because of the propensity for the female body to be taken as a ‘natural’ source for a type of social product, otherwise known as the human *being* (supposedly sex-neutral, yet ordinarily represented in masculine accomplishment) who can potentially realise technocratic/social goals and professional, military or industrial functions. In Irigaray’s words, ‘being engendered for him does not take place once and for all, like god creating the earth according to an eternal, divine plan (2002, p 128). Education may be a kind of ‘making’ synonymous with the production of bedsteads or automobiles, however, such technical procedures may not be the *only kind* of teaching and learning.

The uncertain masculinity of ‘the’ teacher

After considering this argument it might seem that Phoenix should automatically fall into the category of an educator, conceived in the technical, goal-oriented sense. I think this is where Phoenix ended up, as a symbol of a kind of teaching that anybody could do, as long as they sought to properly perfect their technique in accordance with socially and politically ordained rules. But I don’t think the categorisation should be an automatic one. Phoenix came eventually to occupy a place in an educational imaginary that repressed a process of learning stemming from ‘natural’ sexual relations, but the path he took to that symbolic position was stipulated initially by a paradox. The story of Phoenix as it emerges in *The Iliad* reveals that he is potent partly because he is *not* potent: his masculinity does not arise from a regular ‘source’; his power is

not derived from the potency of 'live seed'; he is, in that sense, not a man, not powerful, yet he teaches the hero how to *be* powerful. Teaching is, in effect, a substitute power, and in Phoenix's case, his only power. What Phoenix *does* for Achilles, is represented by one historian as 'making':

Phoenix fled from his father's wrath...and came to seek refuge in the court of Peleus [who] grew so fond of his vassal that he entrusted him with his son's education..."I made you what you are," declares the old tutor proudly. For his role had not ended with Achilles' early childhood: he had been enjoined to look after him on his departure for the Trojan war, and to give the inexperienced youth all the help he needed (Marrou 1956, p 27).

Although some restraint should be exercised in developing an understanding of Phoenix as 'making' Achilles, (since another translation relates ὅτι φημι ἄνθρωπον ἔσθαι, 206V as 'And I reared you to be such as you are' (Homer 1999, p 430-431)) the variation is not entirely coincidental. I take it as instantiating the prevalence of an educational ideology that permits such a confluence of signifiers (rearing/teaching/making) to be a reasonable one. According to that ideology, a teacher assumes power and authority in the same way that a scientist assumes responsibility for the outcome of a technical experiment. We are also bound to assume from Marrou's historicisation that Phoenix had adopted the role of guardian or teacher with enthusiasm and pride. There is little to suggest otherwise; however, a closer examination of narrative detail discloses other matters that may have helped to generate the sense of power and potency that Marrou tends to naturalise in his representation of the character.

This is the story of the paradox underpinning Phoenix *as* teacher: the 'wrath' directed to Phoenix from his father, Amyntor, which compelled him to flee and, eventually, to 'seek refuge' in Phthia with Peleus, arose from Phoenix's assumption of his own father's *place* and *position*. His speech to Achilles reveals that he secretly took over, usurped, the mantle of power proper to his father that defined his father's sexual status. Phoenix recalls that Amyntor 'was enraged with me because of his fair-haired concubine, whom he ever loved, and scorned his wife, my mother (Homer 1999, p 427). In a slightly modified take on the classic Oedipal triangle, Phoenix had slept with his father's lover at the pleading of his mother: 'she begged me by my knees continually, to sleep with his concubine first myself, so that the old man might be hateful in her eyes' (1999, p 427). The plan was for Amyntor to be deprived of the erotic power necessary to win his lover's heart: the penalty was that Amyntor returned the favour, cursing his son, that he may never 'set on his knees a dear child'. Both father and son lose the principle – sexual power – essential to their masculinity.

Having recognised that the Greeks believed the male alone to possess the formative power indispensable to conception, gestation and birth, it is not difficult to conclude that the symbolic consequences of this part of Phoenix's story are not trivial. Another aspect of these consequences, perhaps more obscure, is that having destroyed the links between himself and his father, and having lost the formative potential to engender a son of his own, Phoenix has cut himself off entirely from the masculine genealogy on which so many social and ethical decisions were predicated. For Phoenix, this represented a disastrous split between physical presence and spiritual virtue, between body and soul, between corporeality and the masculine.⁹ That Phoenix should be made, in the next step of the unfolding narrative, to assume functions specific and exclusive to 'woman' in any ordinary sequence of daily life in ancient Greece, seems to further elevate the uncertainty and complexity of the character.

A model for the transcendence of sexually differentiated nature

This enhancement of Phoenix's symbolic power has two features: first, it derives from a double usurpation, of the father's, then of the mother's role, to become, ultimately, a 'maker' of men. This is just the kind of monopolisation of nature, and of sexual powers, that Irigaray has in mind when she criticises the identity of thought and 'being', which proceeds from a privileging of *forms* and the ideal, over *first matter*, and which is, at the same time, a *separating* of form *from* matter/nature (1999, p 92). Just as the separation of form from matter can be mapped onto the contradictions available to the Greeks between male and female sexual functions, so the gap between the development of rationality (of mind) has been separated from physical development (of body).¹⁰

Second, Phoenix's usurpation is not simply carried out as if he relinquished sexual identity. He assumes characteristics of each sex that are, by the way, 'essential' qualities, if represented from a phallogentric perspective: woman as nurturing, man as instructive; and then both of these sets of characteristics are collapsed into a male figure. The implication is clear: value flows 'naturally' to man. Phoenix's symbolic potential is complete, since he can now represent all powers essential to the production of man *isomorphically*, i.e., as a perfect identity of form and social relation. What is more, this isomorphism functions as a mirror for the repression of sexual difference. Whenever Phoenix stands as a universal signifier of teaching and education, he ensures that value is automatically reflected back to the same sex (the masculine), erasing alternate values that might be available from sexual differences in each case.

But why then doesn't the seemingly ultimate signifier of masculinity, the father, or better still, the king - what is more, a mortal capable of attracting an immortal as sexual partner - suffice to fulfil the tasks that fall to Phoenix in the narrative? My curiosity was initially stirred in this study in relation to why Peleus would not assume the role of guardian and teacher himself, if he thought it proper for a man to assume that role. Why does Phoenix come into play at all, in this sense?

It seems that the answer must be at least partially answered by the historical, social and political context in which Homeric narrative came to function as cultural artefact, as literature. According to Jean-Pierre Vernant, Homeric epic such as *The Iliad* served as a vehicle for the expansion of 'access to the spiritual world reserved initially for an aristocracy of priests and warriors'. He writes: 'from court poetry, sung first in the halls of the palace, it was freed, expanded, and transformed into a poetry for popular festivals' (1962/2001, p 21). To some extent we may interpret Phoenix's description of the express purpose of his instruction to Achilles as recognising the importance of participation in a communal culture, demanding a knowledge of 'assemblies in which men become pre-eminent' and of how to 'be both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds' (Homer 1999, p 427). These 'knowledges' were gradually being opened to an increasing group of men in the formation of a state or *polis*, within which each would be a citizen. Vernant argues that 'the spiritual universe of the polis' was marked by the power of speech, distinction in public conduct, and 'in the framework of the city, the tie that bound one man to another...became a reciprocal relationship...all those who shared in the state were defined as *homoioi*, men who were alike' (1962/2001, p 25).

This emerging political and democratic culture of sameness and reciprocity was, of course, limited to a relative few. As Halperin notes in relation to the classical era (after the Homeric era), the Athenian polity was composed of an 'elite corps of adult, male citizens [who] held a virtual monopoly of social and political power' over all other groups, 'women, children, foreigners and slaves' who were not, however, all equally subordinate (1990, p 265-66). Perhaps the character of Phoenix came to be used¹¹ as representative of this growing spiritual universe, of sexual sameness, a good man, a fellow citizen. This may mean that a further aspect of Phoenix's narrative potential derives from the social and cultural effects resulting from the expansion of access to speech and language itself. What I mean here is that Phoenix signifies a kind of definitively symbolic power, that is, he is a symbol of that which *stands in for*, variously, mother, father, fellow citizen, warrior, lover, and so forth. Perhaps the passage through which Phoenix comes into play, in this sense, traces a kind of outline, throwing the social function played by the symbolic order in Greek antiquity into relief, against the trajectory of a developing social and linguistic system.

Teacher's symbolic structure

Irigaray says that the voice – first, the mother's voice, carried on air, as sound, between two – 'fades away in the face of what is spoken' in a male spiritual universe (1999, p 48). The elementary experiences and perceptions of life as a relation between two, different beings, are mediated by a symbolic order that relentlessly operates, like a prototypical machine, to stand in place *of* 'nature', to reduce; to make identical, same, the meaning, the sign, and the thing to which the sign refers.¹² Language and the symbolic are themselves instrumental to metaphysics, as the vehicle carrying the identity between 'form' and 'being' (Irigaray 1999, pp. 74; 86-87; 121). This applies as much to the symbols and roles from which Phoenix drew his position as guardian, as it does to Phoenix himself. It applies especially to sex relations, 'man', 'woman', as much as family relations, 'mothers' and 'fathers': all are inserted into the symbolic order, and their representation in theatre and literature provided the ideal basis for the laws and ethics of family life, providing us with taboos and kinship rules mythologised, for example, in Sophoclean tragedy (Irigaray 1993a, p 110-111; Butler 2000).

In relation to the production of Phoenix as an archetype for 'teacher', I must therefore ask to what the sign is supposed to refer. Am I to conclude that there is nothing else other than a constellation of other signs, to which 'teacher' can be traced back?¹³ Signs for 'father', or 'mother', for man, for nurse, for warrior? Images of 'things' for which the meaning has already been decided? Since the sequence of Phoenix's emergence *as* usurpation of a stereotypically feminine role has already led to the conclusion that value must flow to man, that it must reflect the greater importance of man for the upbringing of Achilles, the hero, the decision as to how representation of the Phoenix *as* teacher was meant to proceed can really only follow that value structure.

Phoenix's motive in becoming Achilles' guardian/teacher derives from his own inability to father a child, from his impotence, his suspect masculinity. Being 'teacher' is his chance to redeem himself, in terms of the imminent loss of genealogy, a genealogy that, in his own terms would have flowed exclusively from him, as man, as father.

And I reared you to be such as you are, godlike Achilles, loving you from my heart...I have suffered much for you and toiled much, ever mindful of the fact that the gods would in no way grant me a son born of me myself. But it was you I sought to make my son, godlike Achilles, so that you may hereafter save me from loathsome destruction (Homer 1999, p 431).

So there is an attempt, in part, by Phoenix to assume the form of a substitute father, just as Achilles is a substitute son. He can do so only on the basis of an ideal model of paternity, since he is, in reality, sterile. Following Lloyd, this ideal paternity can be recognised as an ideal assumption of the formative principle or power belonging 'rightfully' and exclusively to man. It is a power to form (teach) Achilles that does not rest on the wholeness of an originary formative principle (i.e., on a 'live seed'). The latter requires a union between the spiritual and the corporeal, and since Phoenix is lacking this union, he cannot return to it. But he does seek to return to that part of it to which he evidently feels he still has some legitimate claim, to simulate paternity. He seeks to remedy the 'loathsome destruction' of his spiritual being, by making Achilles my son', so that on an ideal level, at least, he could join the ranks of the *bomoioi*, of men who were alike, whole, powerful.

This return to the wholeness of masculine power is to be approached without reference to woman. No contamination by the lesser, 'passive, indeterminate matter' (Lloyd 1984, p 3) would be necessary. Phoenix as teacher is thus an *ideal* maker, a symbol of a formative principle belonging exclusively to masculine spirituality. It contributes to the symbolisation of a masculine history and genealogy that, in Irigaray's terms, forgets its gender and destroys its sexual roots (1993a, p 109) because the power to form came to function exclusively in terms of a race of men who know nothing and value nothing outside their own form, their own ideals.

Conclusion

The power to form in this instance comes to be synonymous with teaching and instruction, owing to Phoenix's simulacrum of a fatherhood that is definitively separated, cut free of its sexual origins, of any association with nature. Teaching is disconnected from the space 'given first by her [woman]' (Irigaray 1999, p 96). From that moment, education could be thought without reference to mothering and fathering, without thinking of the continuity between mother, father and child, as a triangular relation. Having collapsed two into one, Phoenix makes it into a dyadic relation. Any such meaning or association that might have belonged to teaching before, is in fact repressed and at the same time displaced by an idealised representation.

The story of how Phoenix reaches this type of relation is a double tragedy: first because the mother or father to which the teacher-student dyad refers is inevitably reduced and trivialised, as mere *idea* (mother as nurturing, nurse-like, caring; father as disciplined, instructive, furnishing wisdom) from which the teacher appropriates chunks, bits and pieces of imagery that satisfy any ethical propriety that duty-to-child should comply with a kinship-based model. Second, because of Phoenix's failure

even to realise that he mourns *only* the loss of his rights to a masculine genealogy. It is the inability to engender a son 'born of me myself' that he laments. He sought to make Achilles a 'son' who could symbolically rescue him from being cast adrift, having lost his place in the synchronic order of father-to-son. Phoenix does not even recognise that he does not miss a connection to his mother, or even that without a relation to woman, he can never know that man is only man *in a contiguous relation to* woman. He cannot know that man outside that relation has forgotten his own gender, since in that ideal spiritual universe there is no other sex, no different sex.

When we think 'mother' and 'father', we do not automatically make an association to 'teacher'. This is partly because 'mother' and 'father' are, normatively, extremely powerful ensembles of what appear to the subject as highly personalised meanings and values. They always appear to the subject as both unique, and at the same time, as universalised signifiers, which always owe at least one fundamental part of their signification to the same kinship rules. They comprise a hegemonic element that makes it virtually impossible not to mediate the meaning of 'man' or of 'woman' with images of maternal and paternal potentiality.

'Teacher' can similarly be thought in relation to 'mother' and 'father', but it has lost the sexual stipulation guaranteed by the isomorphism of father-man, or mother-woman. This article is a contribution to research that reveals the imaginary foundations on which this loss of sexual identity was based. It historicizes the process of turning 'teacher' into a sexually variable technical function, placing it alongside the scenography of Greek mythology, and, by implication, the panorama of literary and theatrical representations of 'man' and 'woman', that supply so many models of sexual ethics.

The article also refers to the process whereby 'woman' is relegated to an imperceptible, formless, chunk of a sequence, making no contribution to the forming and education of her child. Education is made to look like a sex-neutral technical function because there is no recognition that the space in which formation commences is inescapably sexually differentiated. Woman is the elementary substance with which the formation takes place. As Irigaray argues, Man uses Woman for strict purpose, and according to rigid kinship rules (Irigaray 1992, p 1). If the moments of sexual reproduction are represented as incidental to, rather than foundational for, the activity of engendering a child, then Phoenix's teaching of Achilles can look that much more like a real paternal relation. In his attempts to overcome the separation of his physical being from his spiritual virtue, Phoenix contrives a purpose for his relation to Achilles as *semblance of* paternity. As teacher of Achilles, he can assume on an idealised level all of the rights and duties lost to him when he was cut off from his genealogy. Father, son, warrior, lover, teacher – each image is summoned as parts

in Phoenix's composite narrative, like instruments that permit him to gather together a unified wholeness in place of the wholeness that he has lost.

So beneath the story of this 'first' teacher, this originary educator, is an economy operating relentlessly on the gaping lack of a real relation to his 'son', a lack that must constantly be filled with socially 'approved' images and ideas. Teaching is thereupon inscribed with a hollow, false and empty structure. But the only point in observing that structure is to acknowledge its history: to note that Phoenix's constitution as teacher is symbolic, is substitute, and as such, his story discloses a material reality which *preceded* the idea of teacher, and the *concept* of education. The complex system of distributing value *to* man and away *from* woman in applying that concept, in relentlessly reconstructing the dyad, and making it look as if it were a natural and 'normal' educative relation, establishes a boundary. Left-over, excessive to the concept, the reality on which the boundary was constructed remains, and on that site is a different kind of teaching and learning, ignored and unrepresented in all the modern day psychological categories that lend themselves so assuredly to the technocratic orientations of education.

Notes

- ¹ Irigaray was removed from her university position as a direct result of publication of her PhD thesis in 1974 (Marini 1992, p 137).
- ² For Irigaray, the unconscious is represented in terms of what is repressed – 'woman' – in order that the production of discourse can be organised in relation to the domination of the phallus. Woman is the silence between words, the material, interstitial, a supporting surface, always, already forgotten, by man, and by the system of meaning production from which he benefits. Several works by Irigaray engage fairly explicitly in this methodology, for example, in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985a) she reads Freud, Plato, Kant and other canonical texts, all the while interpreting the position which they ascribe to 'woman': "to play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself – inasmuch as she is on the side of the 'perceptible', of 'matter' – to 'ideas', in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible', by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language" (1985b, p 76).
- ³ See also Harlow (1998) for further discussion of how this one-sex model was sustained throughout Greek and Roman antiquity.
- ⁴ It should be noted that Thetis, being a goddess herself, cannot be counted as abandoning her motherly role altogether. The beginning of the scene in which

Phoenix delivers his speech to Achilles, recounting his tutorship, sees Thetis warning her son about the inevitable outcomes awaiting either of two decisions he must make about a prospective battle.

- ⁵ Lloyd also offers us a quotation from the *Eumenides* by Aeschylus in which the woman's part in gestation, in generating the child is denied. Apollo justifies Orestes' murder of his mother, saying

The mother to the child that men call hers
Is no true life-begetter, but a nurse
Of live seed. 'Tis the sower of the seed
Alone begetteth. Woman comes at need,
A stranger, to hold safe in trust and love (cited in Lloyd 1984, p 4).

- ⁶ Martin Heidegger was himself a recognised scholar on the interpretation of original manuscripts attributed to the 'pre-Socratic' writers, who occupied roughly the same era as Homer and Hesiod. Heidegger himself refers to Homeric poetry in illustrating points he wished to make about those writers (Heidegger 1975, p 32).

- ⁷ 'Pre-Socratic' referring explicitly to thinkers before the Socratic era to which theories of metaphysics are commonly attributed in the work of Plato (who, of course, brings us the work of Socrates) and Aristotle. See Heidegger (1975).

- ⁸ Ellen Mortensen explains this difference as between "that which is 'prior' to all emergent (phenomenal) beings, as that which gives rise to them. Irigaray's discourse pays heed to the figure of the *mater*-ial aspects of giving birth, whereas in Heidegger's language emphasis is put on the 'giving' as present-ing in language" (Mortensen 1994, p 224).

- ⁹ Bruno Snell (1953) offers an influential discussion of the ways in which men in Homeric society would have experienced the world, and their sense of physicality and space as opposed to the *Rational* explanations that emerged after Plato and Aristotle. I have drawn generally on his account in combination with Irigaray's descriptions of the "affirmation" and "love of the body" that were "still spoken of in the Homeric epic" (Irigaray 1993b, p 100).

- ¹⁰ The modern procedure of measuring mental development against chronological stages of physical development merely cements the separation, since it is designed to ascertain the extent to which the gap between body and mind mediates upon the exclusively *mental* process of learning.

- ¹¹ Most historical accounts (Monroe 1909, p 34; Jaeger 1939, p 5; Marrou 1956, p 29) emphasise the continuing use and significance of Homeric poetry for the construction of educational ideals in ancient Greece; indeed the models of textual narrative and of heroism themselves are arguable traceable in large part to the level of emphasis placed continually upon this literature and its foundational part in Western culture. But it should be noted, in this context, that there is considerable discontinuity surrounding the development and practice of using the literature for inculcating the Homeric 'ideal'. A small example of this is that Jaeger's account of

the part played by Phoenix and his substitution in place of Chiron discloses that the poem was not written all at once, and that further subsequent translations and recordings of what was originally an oral tradition led to considerable rewriting and modification. For further details of the discontinuity see also Redfield (1979).

¹² The phallogentric organisation of language and the symbolic order is a key tenet of Irigaray's position which she elaborates in several texts; see especially *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Irigaray 1985b, pp 68-85).

¹³ Following the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, Lacan famously concluded that the signified (meaning) is always and only ever another signifier, asserting language (and more specifically, the unconscious) to be an inescapable structure, wherein meanings are repressed at such an early stage in life that the subject can never really assume total control (imagined as 'free will' and consciousness) over the production of speech. See Lemaire (1977, p 38).

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